A Letter to an Atheist

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Abstract

This essay develops a concise metaphysical argument concerning contingency, explanatory termination, necessary being, and divine hiddenness. It argues that an infinite regress of existentially dependent realities fails to explain existence and that a necessary ground of being provides a more coherent terminus than a brute contingent universe. Drawing from the classical theist tradition, the paper further examines simplicity, timelessness, and the limits of empirical method.

Keywords

God; contingency; necessary being; metaphysics; divine simplicity; atheism; philosophy of religion; Thomas Aquinas

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To ask what would count as proof already raises the question of what kind of reality God would have to be. God is often conceived as immaterial, outside space, and not subject to time. If so, the standards of proof appropriate to material and measurable objects may be insufficient to the subject under consideration.

Many locate final explanation in the universe itself, whether conceived as infinite or self-sustaining. Yet an endless series of dependent things does not become independent merely by being endless — and here the argument requires precision. There are two kinds of causal series. In one, each cause is itself caused by something prior, but the whole series can in principle exist even if the chain extends indefinitely — a son begotten by a father, who was begotten by his father before him. In the other, each member depends for its causal power right now on something currently sustaining it — a hand moves a stick, which moves a stone; remove the hand and the motion ceases at once, however long the stick. The universe is not merely a historical chain where each event precedes the next. It is a structure of simultaneous existential dependence: things do not merely come from prior things, they are held in being at every moment by conditions they did not originate. An infinite regress of this second kind does not distribute the explanatory burden — it multiplies it indefinitely while never discharging it. The question is not how many links there are, but what holds the chain. Adding links is not an answer.

Contemporary cosmology suggests the observable universe is temporally finite in its present form, though whether time itself began remains debated. But temporal finitude is not the deepest issue. Even an eternal universe, ordered by intelligible regularities it does not explain, would remain a dependent structure. One may call this a brute fact

and decline to ask further. But here a distinction matters. Every worldview does eventually reach a terminus — this much is true, and critics like Graham Oppy are right to press it. The question is not whether explanation stops, but what kind of stopping point is coherent. A brute contingent universe stops by stipulating that something which might not have existed simply does. A necessary being stops at something whose non-existence is impossible — something that cannot lack being because its nature simply is to be. These are not equivalent stopping points. One terminates in something that, by its own nature, requires a further explanation it simply refuses to give. The other terminates in something for which the demand for further explanation does not arise, because there is no gap between its essence and its existence. The explanatory gain is not merely verbal — it is the difference between an unexplained given and a self-grounding reality.

If each contingent thing receives existence from another, reason is led to ask whether there must be something that does not receive existence at all, but simply is. Thomas Aquinas called this ipsum esse subsistens: subsistent existence itself. But why should such a reality have the further attributes classical theism assigns it — simplicity, immutability, timelessness? The reasoning is not merely traditional; it follows from the logic of necessary being itself. Whatever is composed of parts depends on those parts, and on whatever holds them together — it is therefore contingent. A necessary being cannot be composite, because composition implies dependence. What is not composite has no distinct essence over and above its existence — it does not have being, it is being. What simply is being, without composition or addition, does not change, because change requires something to gain or lose. What does not change is not in time, because time measures change. And what is not temporal is not the kind of thing empirical instruments are built to find.

A telescope can show stars, not justice. A microscope can show cells, not meaning. If God is not one object among others but the ground of there being objects at all, empirical silence cannot by itself function as a decisive verdict. It is worth acknowledging, however, that the most serious form of the hiddenness argument — associated with philosophers like William Rowe — is not merely that God is undetectable, but that a perfectly good God would have strong reasons to make divine existence evident, and the actual distribution of belief and suffering suggests otherwise. That argument deserves a fuller treatment than this essay can give. What can be said here is that the conclusion does not follow straightforwardly: a God who is not one being among others but the condition of all being may have reasons for the present order that are not transparent to creatures whose understanding is itself derivative. The argument from hiddenness is serious; it is not decisive.

Across centuries and cultures, the question of why anything exists rather than nothing has repeatedly returned. This persistence is offered here not as evidence but as an observation about the question's character. Some enduring questions turn out to be confused — but confusion tends to dissolve under analysis, and this question has deepened rather than dissolved under twenty-five centuries of the most careful philosophical scrutiny ever applied to any problem. That is at least worth noting. Perhaps it marks reason arriving, again and again, at the edge of what reason alone can fully cross.

The argument of this essay does not proceed by locating an observable object within nature. It proceeds by examining whether contingent reality, individually or collectively, can account for its own existence. It argues that an infinite regress of existentially dependent things fails to discharge the explanatory demand, that a necessary being is not merely a different stopping point but a more coherent one, and that the nature of such a being — if the reasoning holds — leads by its own logic toward the classical attributes. Critics may challenge the principle of sufficient reason, the coherence of divine simplicity, or the inference from necessary being to the God of theism. Those are serious challenges. But they must now be met on philosophical ground.

And the question that never goes away is not only a doubt — it is a knock.

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